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ABSTRACT

An intellectual revolution is described in which the logic-centered, value-free model that has served as the foundation for paradigms in psychology is being reevaluated. As part of the intellectual revolution, feminism is presented as a paradigm of scientific inquiry meeting Thomas Kuhn's definition. The question is posed of whether psychologists should continue to adhere to the dominant and traditional paradigms, or whether it is time to recognize feminism as a paradigm of science. Feminist and traditional paradigms are compared and contrasted by focusing on the approaches of each to the areas of rape, incest, and sexual harassment. Two final issues are discussed. The first issue examines how scientific knowledge is limited by paradigms treating psychological processes as individual phenomena unrelated to social context. The second issue explores the social and psychological costs of paradigms that ignore the realities of people's lives. The paper concludes that, as a paradigm of scientific inquiry, the feminist paradigm is contributing to an epistemology of science and is enriching the discipline. Eight ways in which this is happening are listed. (Author/NB)

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Re-Visions of Psychology: Feminism as a Paradigm of Scientific Inquiry

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Re-Visions of Psychology: Feminism as a Paradigm of Scientific Inquiry

Abstract

An intellectual revolution is described in which the logic centered, value-free model that has served as the foundation for paradigms in psychology is being reevaluated. As part of the intellectual revolution feminism is presented as a paradigm of scientific inquiry meeting Thomas Kuhn's definition, and a current dilemma in psychology is specified: Should psychologists continue to adhere to the dominant and traditional paradigms, or is it time to recognize feminism as a paradigm of science? Feminist and traditional paradigms are compared and contrasted by focusing on the approaches of each to the areas of rape, incest, and sexual harassment. Two final issues are discussed: First, how is scientific knowledge limited by paradigms treating psychological processes as individual phenomenon unrelated to social context? Second, what are the social and psychological costs of paradigms that ignore the realities of people's lives?

Re-Visions of Psychology: Feminism as a Paradigm of Scientific Inquiry

Arlene Brownell

Introduction

I organized this symposium after reading a variety of scholarly sources (e.g. Albee, 1982; Bleier, 1984; Ferguson, 1980; Keller, 1985; Marquand, 1986; Schaefer, 1985; Unger, 1985) questioning the beliefs and underlying assumptions that have formed the foundation of 20th century Western thought. At the core of this intellectual revolution is a reevaluation of the logic-centered, value-free model that has served as the fundamental principle of the paradigms of psychology and other scientific disciplines.

Thomas Kuhn employed the concept of a paradigm in his classic writings on scientific epistemology (Kuhn, 1970). A paradigm, according to Kuhn, is the set of personal and cultural beliefs as well as scientific beliefs, underlying assumptions, values, and techniques shared by a particular community of scientists through which theories are generated and tested. To be elevated to a paradigm, a theory must become the most widely accepted explanation for a particular phenomenon among the interested scientific community (Catalano, 1979). Examples of dominant paradigms in psychology are learning theory and experimentalism (Hyde, 1985).

Science progresses, Kuhn said, through intellectual revolution that occurs when existing paradigms fail to explain new information, and new assumptions must be adopted before the normal process of science can again resume. In summary, Kuhn argued that contrary to popular as well as scientific opinion, science is not objective, and that facts exist only within the context of a particular paradigm (Hyde, 1985). When new paradigms yield information that old paradigms cannot explain, then new paradigms gain favor.

At present, traditionally accepted "truths" are being debated in fields as diverse as psychology, biology, philosophy, history, literature, economics, medicine, law, and nursing (Albee, 1982; Keller, 1983; Lerman, 1986; Spence, 1985; Vance, Talbott, McBride, & Mason, 1985). Feminist scholarship serves as an important catalyst of this reexamination and reevaluation of knowledge ("Feminism", 1983). For example, feminist scholarship asserts that the dominant paradigms in the social and physical sciences are androcentric (i.e. male-centered) and ignore or devalue women's realities (Schaef, 1985). In contrast, a feminist paradigm is based on the premise that both female and male perspectives are important, and that neither is necessarily superior to the other, although data indicate that the female perspective has been vastly underrepresented in all facets of the various disciplines.

Feminist scholars criticize traditional psychological paradigms for assuming male characteristics to be the norm. Using this standard, traditional researchers perceive female characteristics to be abnormal when psychological gender differences are found (Frieze,

Parsons, Johnson, Ruble, & Zellman, 1978; Hyde, 1985). Feminist scholars argue that traditional paradigms are biased toward ignoring non-male experiences, such as menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause, and other prevalent female experiences such as rape, incest, sexual harassment, battering, and eating disorders. Also, feminist scholars point out that cultural myths and stereotypes are embedded at the core of traditional theories regarding women.

In addition, traditional paradigms commonly assume the psychology of the individual to be independent of both macro- and microenvironmental contexts. In contrast, a feminist paradigm connects psychological processes to the larger economic, political, and social realities of people's lives (Fine, 1985). This striving for contextual validity within a feminist paradigm leads researchers to utilize a variety of methodologies including, but not limited to, laboratory research, and to examine gender as a descriptive rather than as an explanatory variable (Fine, 1985). Finally, integral to a feminist paradigm, but commonly ignored in traditional psychology, is an analysis of power and status, two variables that serve as alternative explanations for many traditional interpretations of research findings.

To summarize, guided by a feminist paradigm scholars address previously ignored questions, utilize a variety of methods of inquiry, reinterpret the literature, reconstruct traditional theories, and develop new theories.

These introductory remarks bring us to what we wish to accomplish here today. In this symposium, we wish to call attention to what we see as a dilemma in psychology: Should psychologists continue to adhere to the dominant and traditional paradigms, or is it time to recognize feminism as a paradigm of science? We and other feminist scholars (see for example, Hyde, 1985; Keller, 1983) contend that feminism fits Kuhn's definition of a paradigm by comprising a set of beliefs, values, and methodologies that are shared by a community of scientists, and that, contrary to popular belief, feminism as a perspective through which to view the world, "...is neither more nor less objective than other paradigms in psychology" (Hyde, 1985, p. 408).

In the time remaining for my presentation, I will briefly compare and contrast traditional and feminist paradigms by focusing on the area of sexual victimization. In more depth, Mary Kay Biaggio and Debby Watts will compare and contrast the two paradigms by focusing on the areas of anger and eating disorders respectively.

Sexual Victimization: A Feminist Perspective

Since Kuhn's observation that science is infused with cultural beliefs, the influences of the investigators' sex role stereotypes on the outcome of their research have been convincingly demonstrated (Frieze, et al., 1978; Hyde, 1985). For example, feminist scholars have criticized the traditional theory and research in the area of rape and sexual assault for the inclusion of stereotypes as implicit assumptions in research, and for "...finding data to fit biased hypotheses rather than using science to clarify and enlighten" (Burt & Albin, 1981, p. 212).

Rape. The possibilities of date (or acquaintance) rape, fraternity gang rapes, and premeditated rapes were overlooked by traditional approaches that assumed rape to be a rare event that occurred when the victim made herself vulnerable to a psychopathic stranger. Most studies treated rape as a unidimensional construct (Koss, Leonard, Beezley, & Oros, 1985), and tested biased theories by studying biased samples of either rapists in treatment or in prison, estimated to be less than 10% of all rapists (Clark & Lewis, cited in Koss, et al., 1985) or available rape victims, also assumed to be representative. In the development of a more complete understanding of rape, feminist scholars are refuting rape myths by testing traditional versus feminist models of rape victimization (Burt & Albin, 1981; Koss, 1985), and by studying "hidden rape victims" who neither report their victimization to authorities (Williams, 1984) nor identify themselves as victims of sexual assault even though their survey responses indicate experiences clearly meeting legal definitions of rape (Koss & Oros, 1982). Finally, feminist scholars are developing strategies to study perpetrators of sexual aggression who are neither in prison nor in treatment (e.g., Koss, et al., 1985).

Incest. Feminist scholars are also developing a more complete picture of sexual assault by studying incest. Freud's theory regarding incest has dominated the psychiatric literature and guided the treatment of incest for most of the 20th century. In 1896, members of the Society for Psychiatry and Neurology were outraged when Freud originally presented his theory that sexual seduction of children resulted in adult psychopathology of the victims. As a result of his peers' ostracism and censure, Freud altered his theory to reflect that adults' accounts of childhood incest were only fantasies, although Freud's records indicate that originally he had believed his clients' accounts of their early experiences (Masson, 1984).

In the early 1970's, feminist scholars became highly critical of the literature and treatment strategies based on Freud's theory that such "fantasies" are the result of unresolved "Electra complexes" (O'Hare & Taylor, 1983). Research conducted under a feminist paradigm has revealed a pervasiveness and reality of incest quite different than the image conceptualized by Freud. As a result, the recent literature reflects the development of new theories about the problem as well as new methods of identification and treatment of incest victims.

Sexual Harassment. Although working women have always been the targets of sexual harassment, psychology virtually ignored the phenomenon until the 1980's. The conceptualization and typology of behaviors comprising sexual harassment occurred in 1975 when the women's section of the Human Affairs Program at Cornell defined the concept for research (Benson & Thomson, 1982). In 1976, the first survey of sexual harassment was conducted, not in psychology, but by Redbook Magazine. More than 9,000 working women responded; almost 90% reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment at work and 75% of those women indicated that they were unwilling recipients of the harassment (Renick, 1980). In spite of selection bias inherent in this type of methodology, these findings and those of other feminist research are contrary to traditional assumptions of victim-precipitation and victim-enjoyment.

Before closing, I wish to reiterate Thomas Kuhn s observation that facts exist only within the context of a particular paradigm (Kuhn, 1970). With his words in mind, I raise two issues for consideration. First, how is scientific knowledge limited by paradigms that treat psychological processes (e.g., sexual aggression or coping with sexual victimization), as individual phenomenon that are unrelated to social context? Traditional paradigms view status and power as unimportant concepts in their approach to understanding these psychological processes. Under such paradigms work in the area of sexual victimization proceeds from one or both of two assumptions: either perpetrators of sexual crimes are severely psychologically disturbed, or victims invite their victimization. In contrast, in the context of a feminist paradigm, the "facts" are revealed that perpetrators of rape, incest, and sexual harassment are typically "normal", and that they share the characteristic of physical, economic, political, and/or social power and control over their victims. Interestingly, traditional paradigms have focused on the behaviors and attitudes of the victims; the feminist paradigm suggests the possibility of prevention is greater if we focus on the perpetrators.

The second issue to be considered is what are the social and psychological costs of paradigms that ignore the realities of many people's lives? Feminist scholars have criticized traditional paradigms for giving unwarranted credibility to, and thereby perpetuating, cultural myths through the inclusion of untested assumptions. Examples of such untested assumptions include that there are natural (and therefore unalterable) psychological gender differences, as well as assumptions of victim-blame and victim-enjoyment of rape, incest, and sexual harassment experiences. Feminist research is revealing that many victims of sexual assault and/or sexual harassment fail to identify themselves as victims (Bailey & Richards, 1985; Koss, 1985; Williams, 1984). As ethical social scientists, we must consider the possible harmful effects of adhering to theories that do not fit the personal realities of a large percentage of the consumers of psychology.

In closing I would like to reiterate the following points: As a paradigm of scientific inquiry, the feminist paradigm is contributing to an epistemology of science and enriching the discipline in the following ways: (1) by questioning claims that any social science is objective as now practiced (Schaefer, 1985); (2) by thoroughly critiquing the assumptions and methodologies upon which psychological theories and practice are based; (3) by offering alternative hypotheses to heretofore assumed "facts"; (4) by reformulating theory and practice; (5) by developing new sources of information; (6) by raising the consciousness of psychologists and nonpsychologists about the prevalence and realities of specific social problems; (7) by reducing the stigma of seeking help; and (8) by providing a new clinical model that will enable therapists to move away from inappropriate victim-blame, adjustment strategies to practices that promise to better promote psychological health.

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